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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study, presented in the form of an analytical narrative, examined children's symbolic and social use of superhero stories--popular media stories that vividly reveal societal beliefs about power and gender, which are themselves interwoven in complex ways with race, class, and physical demeanor. A second-grade classroom in an East San Francisco Bay K-3 school located in the south central part of an urban area and serving a population diverse in race and social class was observed for three months. Through the writing and acting of stories as part of "Author's Theater" (an optional activity during daily writing time), the children let each other witness their imaginations at work and then raised issues about who plays whom in whose story. The dialogic processes thus enacted allowed more complexity in the rigid images of gender relations and of glorified power. There is no simple classroom procedure that will allow children to achieve some sort of critical consciousness and a world of greater imagined possibilities for all. But there are processes, rooted in the social lives and play of childhood, that can help children deal with the contradictory pressures of growing up in a multicultural society where power is not equally distributed. Contains 20 references and 15 notes. An appendix listing the sex and ethnicity of the second-grade children is attached.) (Author/RS)

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Anne Haas Dyson

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ABSTRACT

Children in our diverse society are not only learning to read and write texts; they are learning to read and write human possibilities. They read each other's faces and clothes as closely as they do any storybook, and they write each other's future in the stories they imagine. This article is an analytic narrative about children's use of stories to reveal and transform images of power and of gender in the local culture of an urban second grade classroom. It is based on a qualitative study of children's symbolic and social use of superhero stories—popular media stories that vividly reveal societal beliefs about power and gender, which are themselves interwoven in complex ways with race, class, and physical demeanor. Through the writing and acting of stories, the children let each other witness their imaginations at work and then raised issues about who plays whom in whose story. The dialogic processes thus enacted allowed rigid images of gender relations and of glorified power to be rendered more complex. There is no simple classroom procedure that will allow children to achieve some sort of critical consciousness and a world of greater imagined possibilities for all. But there are processes, rooted in the social lives and play of childhood, that can help children deal with the contradictory pressures of growing up in a multicultural society where power (i.e., ability to take action and influence that society) is not equitably distributed.

The Ninjas, the X-Men, and the Ladies: Playing with Power and Identity in an Urban Primary School

Anne Haas Dyson
University of California at Berkeley

Holly and Tina, both second graders, are talking over the latest news in the classroom grapevine: Thomas and Aloyse have just been suspended for hitting Monique. Holly states the moral of this true story:

Holly: You're not supposed to slap girls, 'cause girls are not that strong, like boys.

Tina: HUH! The yellow girls are. Like you. You just don't know. You can use your strength. But you just don't know you can. I used it before. (Tina is African American; Holly is mixed race—African American and European American—"yellow," in Tina's terms).

Holly: I can beat up Aloyse. You saw me beat up Aloy—You saw me slap Aloyse twice.

Tina: You saw me beat that boy *up*. Right here. (Tina points to the upper part of her arm, bent at the elbow.) That's your strength. Right there....

Holly: I know. I slapped Lawrence.

Tina: I slapped him and air punched him. (Tina acts out her swift moves.)

Holly: I slapped him 5 times and punched him 6 times.

Tina: You must really *like* him. If you punch him and slap him, that means you like him.

Holly: I *hate* him! (distressed) I was just joking.

Stories, whether told or written, dramatized or sung, are universal cultural tools for evaluating past experiences and for participating in the social present. Within and through stories, we fashion our relationships with others, joining with them, separating from them, expressing in ways subtle and not our feelings about the world around us. As Bakhtin argued, the stories we tell not only shape a specific ongoing relationship (like that between Holly and Tina), they also dynamically reveal our response to broader, deeper cultural conversations (like the children's about gender,

strength, and, in less explicit ways, race ["the yellow girls are"]) (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 259-422).

Stories have this capacity because threaded throughout any particular story are complex cultural "storylines" about relations between people—boys and girls, adults and children, rich people and poor, people of varied heritages, physical demeanor and societal powers (Gilbert, 1994, p. 124). As one aspect or another of these relationships are foregrounded, the stories of any one individual reveal a self that is complex and contradictory (Williams, 1991, p. 130).

Thus, with her storytelling, Holly moves to join Tina in the world of tough girls who know their strength and say "HUH!" to societal beliefs about strength and gender. But she has to quickly deny her story when Tina invokes another belief, one that reflects child culture's long traditions of carefully guarding the borders between boys and girls.[1] Tina *airpunched* her victim; Holly did not—and her story left her vulnerable to the accusation of liking a boy.

Much of children's grappling with issues of social identity and cultural possibilities—with what a person of a certain sex, race, ethnicity, physical bearing and appearance can do or be—happens beyond our direct control, in the social and cultural worlds of childhood.[2] In those worlds, children often seem to take as their guides ninja turtles, karate kids, and other figures of popular culture—often male superheroes and females needing saving.[3]

In this essay, I draw on an ethnographic study in Holly's and Tina's classroom to illustrate, first, the functional appeal of stories that permeate children's peer worlds, particularly popular superhero stories. Second, I aim to illustrate as well the cultural constraints and transformative possibilities of these stories. In Holly's and Tina's classroom, the transformative power of stories was revealed in a classroom practice called "Author's Theater." Through this practice, the children themselves confronted the complex issues of identity and power embedded in superhero stories. Finally, I discuss the qualities of that practice that seemed critical to the transformation of cultural images. Thus, I hope to offer insights about popular culture and childhood that are useful for educators grappling with the beliefs, stories, and symbols of the children under their care.

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[1]The concept of "border" is based on the research of Fredrik Barth (1969, pp. 9-38); he studied how interaction across ethnic group boundaries may strengthen, rather than weaken, those boundaries. Barth's work influenced Barrie Thorne (1991, pp. 64-88); she developed the term "sexual borderwork": boys and girls can strengthen, rather than reduce, their sense of difference through particular kinds of interactions (e.g., boy/girl chase games, teasing when gender expectations are violated). The same phenomenon is described as "category-maintenance work" by Bronwyn Davies (1989, pp. 28-9).

[2]As numerous scholars have documented, groups of children construct social organizations and cultural meanings that are conceptually autonomous (i.e., that have their own integrity) even as they are dialectically embedded within adult worlds; see, for example, studies by Corsaro (1985), Dyson (1993), and Thorne (1991).

[3]For a critical discussion of popular culture, see Giroux and Simon (1989, pp. 1-29).

THE APPEAL, THE PROBLEMS, AND THE POTENTIAL OF SUPERHEROES IN THE CLASSROOM

The desire to imagine oneself in a pleasurable world accounts, to at least some extent, for children's attraction to superheroes. Indeed, for both children and adults, the stories of popular culture may provide images and events that fuel imagination and interaction (e.g., the "trekkie" fan clubs, inspired by the television series *Star Trek*) (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 1-8). Young children seem especially drawn to popular media stories that tap into themes already deeply embedded in common kinds of child play, like boy/girl chasing games, and the encounters between good guys and bad guys.[4]

The scripted roles and dramatic action of superhero stories provide familiar ground for the complex negotiations of childhood play. To enact a narrative world, children must share thematic material—they must agree, for example, that babies need mothers, the desired need suitors, and competitors need other competitors, most commonly, good guys need bad guys. Moreover, they must also negotiate their own rights to certain identities, to certain roles (Garvey, 1990, pp. 79-100).

Thus, the social enactment of stories involves complex negotiations of identity, which themselves raise issues of inclusion and exclusion. "We already have all the parts," the children in the story might say to an outsider wanting to play too. Through such rejections, children may protect their fragile story space from disruption (Corsaro, 1985, pp. 122-149). But, as I will illustrate, they may also ward off others who do not fit their visions of who can and cannot play certain roles.

As adults, we worry that children are not imagining alternative roles for themselves, that they are appropriating stories with stereotypical relations between women and men, between people of different races, ethnicities, and social classes (e.g., see any issue of *Teaching Tolerance* magazine). And yet, the fluidity of children's individual and collective sense of self and others—their desire to both defy and conform to dominant images, evident in Tina's airpunches and Holly's "joking"—is a key to the transformation of limited and limiting visions. Those contradictions, though, need space for exploration and manipulation.

For example, children's desires to be powerful in some way, to feel strong, and the ways in which simplistic definitions of power and of gender relationships put them at odds with each other and, indeed, with themselves can be brought out in the open. The dialogic process of exploring contradictions and conflicts, of grappling with issues of inclusion and exclusion, allow the stories of girls, boys, and powerful people to begin to be transformed.[5]

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[4]For an illuminating study of Australian school children's use of television in their social interaction and play, see Palmer (1986).

[5]Maxine Greene (1988) provides a rich discussion of the connections between classroom dialogue and critical examination of societal relations.

In Tina's and Holly's classroom, the children explored their visions of themselves and others—not in the ways that adults might, by much explicit and critical talk about the meaning of social categories like "man" and "woman"—but by choosing playmates and then playing in front of each other. Tina, Holly, and their friends let each other witness their imaginations at work and then raised issues about who plays whom in whose story; they thus enacted and negotiated the organizational structures and routines their teacher offered, structures and routines named "Author's Theater."

AUTHOR'S THEATER: REVEALING PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

The Data Base

My own story is based on 3 months of observation at an East San Francisco Bay K-3 school located in the south central part of an urban area and serving a population diverse in race and social class. I observed primarily in Holly's and Tina's second grade classroom, a classroom guided by their skilled teacher Kristen. (The Appendix provides demographic information on the 28 second grade children.)

When Kristen took over this classroom in March of the school year,[6] she initiated a daily writing time and, as an optional activity during that time, an Author's Theater. In this practice, related to one developed by Paley (1980, pp. 162-67), the children chose classmates to act out their "written" stories.[7] During writing time, there was much informal talk about who was doing an Author's Theater story—and about who was going to be whom in it. After each Author's Theater presentation, the children had an opportunity to comment on and ask questions of the author.

The children, as individuals and as a collective, wrote many kinds of stories with roots in experiences at home and at school. But one kind of story—the kind that led to the most explicit talk about issues of identity—had its roots in the popular media: the superhero story. Initially the children's popular media stories focused on ninja turtles but, in time, the turtles were overtaken by X-men, superheroes with mutant powers found in comic books, video tapes and games, trading cards, and, most accessible of all, Saturday morning cartoons. The writing and acting of X-men stories was a particularly

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[6]The children's original second grade teacher left the school because of her pregnancy. When Kristen arrived, the class was experiencing racial tensions; for example, a number of white children and Black children accused each other of only liking children of their own race. Kristen hoped opportunities to express themselves through writing, acting, and talking would help the children, not only become writers, but also come to know each other better. She noted also that interest in ninja turtles and X-men cut across racial lines, and so she did not discourage popular culture stories. I stress, however, that many kinds of written texts were read, discussed, and written during the course of the school day.

[7]Although this practice was part of the daily composing period, certain children sometimes only pretended to have actually written a story. They would stand up to "read," having nothing at all on their papers. In addition, sometimes a child author would designate a reader (a designation requiring an actual text) and then assume a desired role in her or his own story.

rich source for the study of child representation and transformation of gender and power because X-men are a collective (unlike single superheroes like Batman) and include males and females as both X-men and arch rivals.

Although superhero stories were composed primarily by boys, both boys and girls knew about the X-men characters and regularly watched the Saturday morning cartoon. However, knowledge of X-men was class- and, therefore, race-related, at least in part because the middle class parents generally did not encourage this form of entertainment. Thus, some interested children learned about X-men from the talk, play, and story writing of their peers.[8]

I also learned about superheroes from the children's talk, play, and story writing. I visited Kristen's classroom for 2 to 5 hours each week, taking notes, audiotaping Author's Theater events, and collecting the children's written stories. As the project progressed, I talked with children about their attraction to these popular figures and, also, about whether or not their parents allowed them to watch the Saturday morning cartoon. I also talked extensively with Kristen, who confirmed and extended my own information through regular discussions with both parents and children. Finally, two research assistants, Wanda Brooks and Elizabeth Scarboro, studied ninja turtle movies and X-men videos, focusing especially on the roles of male and female characters.

From all this study, I constructed my own narrative about the appeal, the limits, and the transformative possibilities of superhero stories. My narrative has three central characters, each of whom played a key role in the classroom drama: Tina, Holly, and Sammy. Tina and Holly, like other girls, initially did not write about popular culture; they wrote about friends and family.[9] But they knew about ninjas and X-men, and, moreover, they wanted acting parts in the boys' stories. As I will illustrate, Tina and Holly were classroom change agents in part because they articulated their exclusion in sociopolitical, rather than personal, ways.

Sammy, who was also African American, was new in the school and very much wanted friends. Fascinated by ninjas and X-men, he used Author's Theater to gain a foothold into what was initially the boys' domain; at the same time, he shared racial and cultural background, not to mention a neighborhood, with Holly and Tina. As I will also illustrate, his desire for the boys' approval and his vulnerability to pressure from the classroom social activists contributed to Sammy's role as a change agent.

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[8]Groups of children did play X-men on the playground during morning and noon recess. Although I only observed mixed-race groups of boys engaged in such play (a variant of good guys/bad guys chase games), both girls and boys reported that sometimes the boys "let" the girls play the roles of female X-men.

[9]During the project, approximately *48%* of all written products by girls centered on relationships with family and friends (30 of 63); *76%* of all products included specific named emotions. Only *14%* of the boys' products (9 of 65) were so centered and less than *1%* included specific named emotions. In contrast, *46%* of the boys' texts drew on media superheroes stories, but only *8%* of the girls' did.

The narrative itself unfolds in four sections (chapters, in a sense). In the first, the excluded girls seek access to the existent symbolic order—one where powerful boys save "foxy" girls. In the second, new symbolic possibilities for gender relations and for the portrayal of power are rendered null by social dynamics that maintain the cultural status quo. In the third, the symbolic order is complicated, as the excluded girls, especially Tina, take control of the storylines; they both pursue "male" power and engage the boys in "female" action. As the children declare and manipulate their sense of cultural possibilities, contradictory storylines interweave themselves in new fictions. Thus, rigid images of gender relations and of glorified power are challenged, rendered more fluid, more complex, as the fourth section illustrates.[10]

In short, this analytic narrative is about children's use of superhero stories to reveal and transform images of power and of gender in the local culture of a classroom, images that are themselves interwoven in complex ways with race, social class, physical appearance, and personality (including being relatively more sociable or reticent). The characters are energized by the desire to play and by complex issues of inclusion and exclusion; and the resulting plot line is dialogic, as competing visions conflict, co-exist, and interweave.

The Ninjas and the "Lady": The Right to Be Rescued

In the early spring of 1993, ninjas were dominant cultural symbols in the second grade. In their most popular variant, they were four teen-age mutant turtles. The turtles, who were trained by a wise old Asian rat, used karate to fight bad guys and to help April, a young female reporter; this reporter was, in their words, a "babe," a real "fox."

Undergirding the ninja stories, then, were narrow, clearly differentiated roles for males and females. Both boys and girls explicitly said, and implied by their play, that boys wrote ninja stories because then they got to play karate. On the other hand, girls wanted to play April, because she "is cute," to quote Holly.

The possibility of being "cute." No boy ever wrote April's name in a ninja story; rather, they wrote the names of the turtles and then set up the action between the good guys (the turtles) and the bad guys (led by Shredder, an Asian human). Sammy's first ninja turtle story began in a typical way:

Ouse upon a time	[Once upon a time
ther war Ninja turtle	there were ninja turtles.
ther name war	Their names were
Michoagelo Leonardo	Michaelangelo, Leonardo,

[10]The complex nature of the girls' grappling with gender relations and power—their seeking of access to the existent order, their attempts to reverse that order, and, finally, to make more fluid the relationship between gender and identity—connects with the multifaceted nature of the feminist movement in adult society. See especially Julia Kristeva, who called for new aesthetic practices to "bring out—along with the *singularity* of each person and, even more, along with the multiplicity of each person's possible identifications ... the *relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence*" (1986, p. 210; emphasis in the original).

raphal Donotelo
and the war nice
and they war friend
and the mean was
Shredder

Raphael, Donatello,
and they were nice
and they were friends
and the mean (one) was
Shredder.]

The possibility of a girl in a ninja story, though, was common knowledge and a potential point of negotiation in the peer talk before an Author's Theater. Even if the author did not specifically mention April, a part for her could *potentially* be improvised by the author during the performance, and improvisations of plot were not uncommon.

Still, there was only *one* girl part. Moreover, when the boys discussed that girl, they emphasized her desirability, just as the turtles do in the original movie. Listen, for example, as Sammy talks to Seth, Jonathan, and Radha; the latter three boys have just agreed to play the ninjas in his story.

Sammy: And you know who April is? Melissa.

Radha smiles at this, eyes widening, being playfully dramatic. He turns and grins at Seth and Jonathan.

Sammy admired these boys, especially the competitive Seth, whose economically and socially privileged background was marked in his dress, in the objects he brought from home, in his stories of family trips, and in the polite but consistent ways in which he assumed positions of leadership. In the ninja stories, Sammy, Seth, Jonathan, and Radha were all on the same male team, friends united in their toughness and in their admiration of a female.

Perhaps because the ninja movies emphasize the physical features of the "babe" or "fox," the visual image of April herself—slender, well-dressed, and white—seemed fixed. In contrast, the emphasis of all male superheroes (whether turtle, human, or mutant human) is on the enjoyment of aggressive, physical power; looking like the superhero was not necessary for the boys.

Thus, a girl like Tamara, a blue-eyed blond whose poverty was as marked as was Seth's privilege, could never be an April and, initially, neither could a girl of color. The role went to Melissa or Sarah, two friendly, attractive girls, both middle class and white. Neither child was familiar with ninja turtles (or X-men), because they were not allowed to watch shows with violence in them. And neither actively campaigned for the April role. These girls were *sought* for that role, and they pleasantly agreed when any boy asked.

Indeed, during composing time one day, Lawrence, who was biracial, commented to his peers that April *had* to be white—a statement that led to immediate and firm objections from Holly, Lettrice, and Aloyse (who told Kristen, who objected as well). At the very moment that he stated this rule, Lawrence was drawing Professor X—the bald, white leader of the X-men superheroes—as a Black man with a flat top. Moreover, Lawrence's regular school playmates were African American and often included both girls and

boys. Lawrence was making a specific statement about a specific story, and he seemed genuinely startled by the objections. (Lawrence, I should add, did hear these objections. He offered Monique, a dark-skinned African American child, the role of April in his next ninja production.)

The possibility of acting. Well before Lawrence's statement, Holly, Tina, and other girls, Black and white, had been complaining about not being allowed a part in the boys' ninja stories or, in the case of Melissa and Sarah, of being allowed a part, but then having nothing to do. Moreover, Holly and Tina saw their exclusion, not as a matter of individual affront ("you never let me play"), but as a matter of collective exclusion ("you never let girls play").

Holly, Tina, and other girls wanting roles began to push hard whenever they noticed any boy offering roles in a superhero story. And they especially pushed Sammy, who wrote more superhero stories than anyone else and who also very much wanted to be liked by everyone. Sammy was very vulnerable.

On the day Sammy chose Melissa for his ninja turtle story and secured Radha's approval, Holly and her classmate Johnetta asked over and over for a part to play. Sammy explained that there were no girl parts, other than April's. But the children continued to demand a role, and Johnetta even said she would be a boy. (Indeed 7 of the girls on varied occasions voiced their willingness to take boy parts, if need be.[11])

"OK, you can be a bad guy," said Sammy, but he immediately changed his mind. "You're Verna," he said. "She a lady. You're not no bad guy. You a lady. Verna. April friend. She [Holly] a lady too."

Although ostensibly successful in negotiating a role, the girls were *not* given a written part in Sammy's story; nor did Sammy, on his own, improvise a female role when he stood in front of the class. He concentrated on organizing for the display of physical power; he introduced the characters and set up the fight scene by having the bad guys invade the good guys' territory. All three girls—Holly, Johnetta, and Melissa—began complaining loudly that they had nothing to do. United in their discontent, they disrupted the play. In response, Sammy improvised:

> Sammy: (pretending to read) Verna and April was friends. They used to play with each other. [Johnetta and Melissa join hands and play ring-a-round-the-rosy, a common class metaphor for girl play.] They used to play with each other. And the lady [Holly]—I don't know who she is. She a lady—she a nice lady too. She April and Verna friend, and they play. [Holly joins the ring-a-round-the-rosy.] Until the Rat King is coming.
>
> Sammy is now preparing to return to the boys and the fight scene, but Holly whispers frantically.
>
> Holly: Say I got bit by a rat and the turtles have to help me.

---

[11]Palmer (1986) reported that, in male superhero play, all "good guys" were boys; "baddies" were imagined or played by younger sisters and girls (p. 106).

Sammy obliges and, finally, the fight begins.

In brief, the ninja stories typically excluded girls. There was some possibility of negotiation; however, to gain a role, a girl had to fit the specifications of a superhero script. And those specifications did not position males and females as equal members of the same team. Thus, Holly, a working class girl of color, worked hard to gain the right to be rescued. When the X-men arrived, however, the girls' ambitions changed notably, as I illustrate in the section to come.

On the Gender of X-men: The Right to Be Tough

During the spring months, the X-men craze grew in the classroom, just as it did in the entire Bay Area, from kindergarten through secondary school. A major Bay Area paper listed the X-men as dominant "in" figures among youth—both boys *and* girls. Contributing to the appeal of the popular comic characters, who were first published in 1963, was the new X-men cartoon show on Saturday mornings.

New possibilities for inclusion. The appeal of the X-men to the second grade girls seemed tied to the greater role of girls in superhero play. For example, second grade Rhonda explained, "Most of the girls, they don't like [ninja turtles].... It's meant for boys." When I asked why, Rhonda elaborated, "Everybody want to be April, but—'cause—there's supposed to be *one* April." So, "kids really play cartoons like X-men... [that have] Storm, Jean, and all that," that is, all those X-men characters who, like Storm and Jean, are women.

Her peer Michael concurred, "You just hate ninja turtles because it's not that much girls on it. But you like X-men because it's got X-men girls on it." And first grader Briana, whom I talked with regularly on the playground, explained further. The ninjas only have "one girl that needs some help.... They have *girls* in that [X-men] show. And they have some...Black girls and some white girls... The X-men are friends and they help each other."

Indeed, all children familiar with the superhero stories agreed that both girls and boys are on the X-men team. Moreover, they knew too that, in Sammy's words, the X-men women are "as strong as men." Further, X-men stories emphasize mental as well as physical strength; in fact, Professor X, the leader of the X-men, is in a wheelchair. Thus, the girls had new grounds for demanding inclusion, as Holly made clear to Lawrence:

Lawrence is making a list of characters he plans to include in his X-men story. He includes only one girl (the X-men character Storm), which Holly finds quite irritating.

Holly: That's *all*! (with exasperation) You know some other girls in it. (with definitiveness).

A new reason for exclusion. Despite the new possibilities X-men stories offered for gender relations, the *exclusion* of girls continued. And this exclusion had its roots in an X-men theme that was, from an adult

perspective, rather minor in the cartoon—that of romantic relationships. Certain X-men males flirt with and, in some cases, have named relationships with X-men females (e.g., Jean Gray and Cyclops, two X-men characters, are engaged). Thus, a boy including a "lady" was potentially making a public statement about romantic love.

In schoolchildren's social worlds, a boy and girl who *willingly* choose each other's company in public places (i.e., without adult coercion) are often victims of heterosexual teasing, particularly by boys (see Thorne, 1991, pp. 54-55). Outside the context of Author's Theater and the public display of one's imagination, knowledgeable girls and boys, together and separately, talked about the powers of both male and female X-men. But when the identities of powerful X-men were assumed by boys and girls planning public performances, sexual border wars erupted, and the team disbanded.

This was dramatically illustrated by the fate of the X-men characters Rogue and Gambit. The girls who watched X-men preferred Rogue, a red-haired Southern woman, who is friendly, humorous, able to fly great distances, to absorb the power of others, and, moreover, is just plain "tough," as both girls and boys acknowledged. There was some sentiment for Storm, a Black woman who can control the forces of the weather. But, as Tina explained, Storm "be getting knocked out too much." When Storm gets exhausted from controlling the weather—"knocked out"—Rogue regularly saves her.

For similar reasons, Sammy and many other boys liked Gambit, a Cajun who, like Rogue, is friendly, humorous, and powerful—able to convert matter's potential energy into explosive power. Nonetheless, both Rogue and Gambit, *powerful* characters, became power*less* in the X-men play. In X-men cartoons and comics, Rogue and Gambit sometimes flirt. They have no physical relationship—in fact, Rogue likely would kill anyone she kissed (as she did her first boyfriend). And yet, if a boy moved to put Rogue in his X-men story, the romantic potential between Rogue and Gambit closed out the collaborative meaning of a tough X-men team—and the teasing that thus followed destroyed the team.

Sammy, in particular, seemed to exploit the romantic tension for peer group control. An enthusiastic X-men fan, Sammy's first written X-men story, like his ninja stories, set up two teams (the good guys and the bad guys) and the possibility of a fight:

> Ouse upon a time
> ther was X man
> [and] the bad guys
> and they was try[ing] to destory x-man

As Sammy was writing this story, Tina and Holly began begging for the role of Rogue. Sammy said Tina could be Rogue—and then immediately proclaimed, "You [Tina] marry Radha, 'cause he Gambit." And, of course, both Tina and Radha immediately abandoned their roles to avoid the

humiliation of being teased, and Holly lost all interest in her favorite character.

Sammy seemed to delight in the tensions he caused, but most boys simply left girls out. Indeed, boys sometimes assured potential players, as Nyem did Patrick, that "it ain't no girl gonna be in it." And, conversely, a boy being recruited might ask "Who don't got a girl friend in there?", as Thomas did when Sammy asked him to be in his story.

The X-men play, then, raised the possibility of new images of gender and of power. But in child worlds, like adult worlds, meanings do not come in any direct way from stories themselves; meanings are constructed and reconstructed in the social world that takes up the story. And, in this classroom—as in many others in our society—boys' willing and public association with girls made both sexes vulnerable. Thus, a boy author, deeply attracted to the power of male superheroes, could use girls to gain power over both boys and girls. Or, he could avoid girls, and the usual good guy/bad guy play could proceed.

Refashioning X-Men: The Right to Be Strong and Weak

Holly and Tina continued to be frustrated by the lack of access to superhero play. So the girls did what excluded but not defeated people often do—they wrote their own stories. Not surprisingly, these stories, composed by authors situated in the social world very differently, revealed a complex, contradiction-ridden response to the ongoing conversation about gender and power.

Tina was the first to declare her intention to write her own X-men story. "And no boys," she said firmly to Holly, "'cause the boys doesn't let us play."

Sitting side-by-side, Tina and Holly began to playfully plan their X-men story. At first Tina said she would be Rogue. But then she became "the toughest guy in the world.... We're all Blobs!" (Blobs are huge, fleshy mutant humans, virtually indestructible and very bad guys.) "'Cause if somebody threw a metal ball at me, the energy go right through me and I would never know. And we're sisters robbing the world.... And we'll never get sick. And we'll never die."

The sisters evolved, Tina becoming Uncle Blob, Holly niece Blob. The biological sex of Tina vacillated, as if she was struggling with the possibility of being tough and female. As the girls became more and more animated, they moved to the classroom rug, deep in play:

Tina: I'm about to go get Rogue! And I'm tying her up and cutting her [red] hair off.

Holly: 'Cause there's fire in there!

Uncle Blob (Tina) "drinks" Rogue's hair, absorbing her fire power—but leaving none for his poor niece Holly Blob, who seems to find herself once again in a weak role. Holly begs for the right to be like her Uncle, to be powerful:

Holly: Why you drunk it all, Uncle? Why can't I be like you, uncle? I want to be like you uncle.

Tina: You're like your mother, not like me. (shooting fire)

Holly: Can I be like you?

Uncle Blob (Tina) gives her a small bit of fire power in a (pretend) cup, just a bit, though.

Tina: The only thing you can do is just shoot out fire at them [the X-men] and then just call me. (There are shades here of the ninja turtle stories and of April who has to call for help.)

Tina was seemingly in revolt, trying on a role very different from that of a weak, desirable girl with a heart of gold. She was using her strength, this tiny child whose journal was entitled "The Peace Book" and who wrote, as did Holly, about family and friends and relationships. Although Holly was in the weaker role, she was entertaining the possibility of an alternative vision.

Class composing time ended before the children had put pencil to paper, but they intended to write their X-men story the next day. Such a story, however, one where second grade girls become unapologetic bad guys, would not survive in the public sphere of the classroom. It would be constrained by the social pressure of girls and boys seeking inclusion as powerful good-guys and, then, by the sexual border work that threatened a team of women and men. Still, as Uncle Blob and her niece re-entered the culture of the classroom, they did not go quietly into the realm of the more conventional superhero story.

Holly's tired X-men. The next day Tina was absent (Tina missed a great deal of school), so Holly tried to write the story herself. But as soon as the word was out that Holly was writing an X-men story, the pressure began to add characters—good guys. And Holly, like Sammy, did not want to disappoint people, as she later explained to Kristen:

Holly: I thinked about it, and um I said, I said there should be some other people then this. Then I—when I start asking people, Aloyse, he be all, and James kind of following me and saying, "OH! Can I be, Can I be Cyclops?" and all that stuff.

As Holly agreed to allow one character after another into her story, she abandoned the idea of the Blob family and decided to become the once-again powerful Rogue (who, just the day before, had been rendered vulnerable by the Blobs). Unfortunately, Holly's friend Liliana also wanted to be Rogue, and a loud argument began. Rahda, Ricky, and Kevin, working nearby, looked over at the feuding friends:

Radha: What are you fighting over?

Ricky: Do you both wanta be Rogue?

Without waiting for an answer, the three boys begin to chant in unison.

Boys: Rogue and Gambit, sitting in a tree. [Holly: Shut up!] K-I-S-S-I-N-G.

The rhyme goes on, graphically depicting female anatomy—despite the fact that physical contact between Rogue and Gambit is portrayed as impossible in the X-men stories.

Both girls were immediately silenced, and both temporarily abandoned their ambitions to be Rogue. Holly adopted what she perceived as the weaker role of Storm. (Later Liliana reclaimed Rogue, and Radha confided to Holly that he had wanted to be Gambit, but since he could not get rid of Rogue, he would be the loveless X-men character, Archangel.)

Despite the strong social pressures, Holly's final text portrayed a distinctly different X-men team. Not only were her characters predominantly female, they were also people with feelings about each other, just as was typically the case in girls' written worlds. Further, Holly's X-men were ambivalent about their physical powers, as are the media's X-men, who sometimes long to be "normal" and bemoan the destructiveness of physical violence. Holly, pressured into the role of Storm, depicted exhausted X-men, complaining about their responsibilities:

Once upon a time there was
a grop of people it was the X-Men.
Storm said I am tirde [tired] of
changing the weather
but you have to keep working
Arckangel said. I'm tired
of working too, rogue said.
I have to save storm evre time
she fall. I get tired of
fighting bad guys. Ready to fight?
and they all had fun. the end.

The last two sentences had been hastily added when Kristen said composing time was over—and one can wonder how much fun they all were having.

In this publicly enacted story, Holly was not a nameless nice lady in a superhero story, nor was she a little girl who alternately liked and fought with her girl friends (the dominant plot of her previous tales). Holly entered into the power politics of classroom superhero stories, armed with a pencil, and emerged a tired superhero, saved by another tired superhero. The dominant good guy/bad guy plot was intertextually linked with her history as a writer of relationships and with her present position as a pressured girl. Thus, that plot lost some of its "authority," as Bakhtin might say (1981, p. 424); Holly brought to the public stage—and thereby involved the class as actors and audience members in—an alternative story. In that story, girls and boys could be on the same team; moreover, physical power was not necessarily such fun. Sometimes the good guys just wanted to leave the bad guys alone.

Tina's grieving X-men. The next day, when Tina returned, she also found herself embroiled in classroom power plays. At first, Tina was determined to continue to be Blob, even when pressure came from her former niece, Holly.

Tina is sitting during composing time with Holly, Liliana, Sarah, and James.

Holly: Can I be Rogue?

Tina: You're all bad guys. I got all the part of you all.

Holly: We're not bad guys.

Tina: But so! You can't beat me! Hey-hey-hey-hey! You can try to beat me all you want.

Liliana: Are you Jean Gray [another X-men character]?

Tina: No I'm Blo::b. You can't kill me:::::.

Liliana: A BOY::.

Tina: So! I wanta be a boy.

Still, the pressure continued. Holly was determined to be Rogue, and Monique wanted Storm. Sarah said she would be any good-guy girl, and then James asked to be Wolverine. So Tina relented, with evident exasperation, "You don't want to be a bad guy? OK. Fine. You're not a bad guy."

These classroom negotiations resulted in a story without Blob. Indeed, during Author's Theater, Tina took no role; she read the following story herself:

ods tare wry 4 x-man	Once there were 4 X-men.
in the x-man fote othr	And the X-men fought others.
own x-man died	One X-men died.
and the rast uavy they wrey	And the rest of them were
sad they criyd	sad. They cried.
Storm flow away	Storm flew away.
rogue stry to criy	Rogue started to cry.
Jeen Gray cam	Jean Gray came.
Black Momy cam to	Black Mommy [a bad guy] came too.
They all fote	They all fought.
and the x-man won	And the X-men won.
rogue found storm	Rogue found Storm.
She was making weather	She was making weather.
and they all lived	And they all lived
happy eave after the end.	happy ever after the end.

During the enactment of her play, Tina was particularly attentive to James' participation:

Tina: (reading) "One of the X-men *died*."

No one dies. So Tina repeats the sentence louder.

Tina: "ONE OF THE X-MEN DIED." Die! Die!

Finally a girl dies.

Tina: "And the rest were very sad. They cried." (Holly cries). Everybody cry now, even the *boys*.

Actually neither James or Monique were pretending to cry. Moreover, in the real second grade world, boys were as likely to cry as girls. But crying boys are not common in superhero stories. So Tina marked James' failure to participate, as the failure of the cultural category of *boys*.

After the play was over, James complained that he had nothing to do in Tina's play.

James: You didn't give me no part.

Tina: Your part was to cry and to fight.

James: Uh uh.

Tina: I said *everybody*, including *you*, should cry. *Everybody*, including *you*, should fight.

Thus, in Holly's and Tina's visions, superhero teams were dominated by women of color who, nonetheless, served with women and men of different races. Moreover, power itself was tempered with human fragility: people fought, became tired, grieved, and died. These two activist girls—experienced writers of relationships—were changing the possibilities for superhero stories in the local culture of the classroom. While conventional male-exclusive superhero stories continued, they were "dialogized," to use Bakhtin's word (1981, p. 426); that is, they were rendered a possibility among other possibilities. In fact, it was Sammy who put together the first well-integrated X-men team.

The X-People: The Right to Play

During the last composing period of the school year, Sammy asked in an open way who wanted to be in his X-men story. Moreover, Liliana and Aloyse ignored the teasing that began when their roles as Jean Gray and Cyclops (engaged characters) were known.

Thus, the children took the roles they wanted and stayed with them. The teasing stopped, the story was read, the drama enacted—an unusual X-men drama. In Sammy's production, the X-men were indeed gender-balanced: there were 4 girls and 5 boys. Moreover, of the 2 bad guys, one was a girl and one a boy. (And, while the children on the stage were predominantly African American, the girls and boys were racially integrated too.)

After the play was over, Kristen asked if there were any comments. A number of children noted that acting out the story had been fun, and others noted that it had been fun to watch. And, indeed, it was an unusually pleasant superhero play—no teasing, no girls or boys stomping off the stage, no one complaining that somebody didn't get to play or had nothing to do.

Then Sammy himself, with no prompting from any one, said, "And there were really more X-men. The *X-people* were boys and girls, and the um bad guys were boys and girls"—a spontaneous semantic transformation to mark the cultural one. Thus Sammy seemed to know that, at its roots, the disruption of classroom superhero stories was about inclusion, exclusion, and the right to play.

ON READING AND WRITING THE FUTURE

I have told a story of children creating and recreating the meaning of superhero stories in the company of each other, opening up their own interpretations—their own pleasures—to the responses of others. Issues of cultural images literally played themselves out, yielding alternative visions of power and of gender. The relationships enacted were more diverse than the ones that stopped Tina's and Holly's playful talk in the opening anecdote—images of romantic liking, passionate hating, and the strong male threatening or saving the lady "needing some help." In at least some of their stories, the children were more like supportive brothers and sisters confronting common dangers, sharing common emotions, than romantic lovers or unidimensional superheroes.[12]

Although individual children have been featured, their stories were shaping—and being reshaped—within the larger classroom drama produced by their teacher, Kristen. Her means, the composing and acting of stories, would not necessarily yield similar dynamics in all classrooms; but certain qualities of Author's Theater seem critical to promoting the dialogic process of confronting and interweaving conflicting storylines.[13]

First, the practice was consistent with children's ways of reflecting and it focused on children's issues, particularly, the right to play. Critical discussions of how stories represent women, men, and power may, in and of themselves, have limited impact on children's imaginations (see, for example, Davies, 1989, pp. 43-69). Children seem to examine gripping media stories from "inside the experience," by playing and replaying them, rather than by "holding them up as objects of scrutiny" (Palmer, 1986, p. 113).

The practice of Author's Theater allowed children to do just that, to be actively involved in each other's visions of pleasure and power. In some situations, it seems wise to tell young children "You can't say you can't play," as the master teacher Vivian Paley does in her moving book on "the habit of

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[12]For a discussion of the sibling metaphor, see Thorne (1991, p. 172).

[13]For practical suggestions for engaging young children in critical reflection on text, see Comber and O'Brien (1993).

rejection" (Paley, 1992, pp. 3-36). And, in fact, sometimes Kristen did control the children's play and work partners, directing them, for example, to choose somebody they "don't know very well," somebody they "didn't usually play with," or even, somebody "of a different race." But, in the context of Author's Theater, Kristen said, in effect, "You can say you can't play. But when you say that in this public place, you must face the consequences of your decisions. And I will help."

Second, the social practice of Author's Theater provided a routine where children could voice their comments and questions as individuals and as members of groups. And consciousness of groups (e.g., "You never let girls play") is required, for any one child's imagination is realized or constrained by the "sociological imagination" of the class as a whole, by the ways the community imagines the intersection of individual biographies with societal possibilities (Mills, 1959, pp. 5-8). Importantly, in Kristen's room, the children most sensitive to issues of social inclusion and exclusion—and thus best posed to take action for social change—were *not* the most advanced child writers (i.e., they did not write the longest, most developed stories). Indeed, the principal considered retaining Tina because of her absences and her perceived skill limits. Potential for critical reflection and social action has not been a valued "skill" in our schools.

Third, the practice was under careful monitoring by the teacher. Kristen brought some of the children's play into the public sphere of formally composed, enacted, and discussed stories, and then she carefully monitored the interaction. She did not ignore the gender and power issues of the children's superhero stories. She did not ban these stories, but she also did not have the children simply publish and edit them.[14] She tapped and exploited the social dynamics of childhood to help the children examine them. To this end, she made sure the children listened to each other's opinions and feelings and, when need be, she spoke clearly and firmly for fairness, as in her response to Lawrence's assertion about the role of April.

However, an enriching of classroom cultural images came about, not only because of formal presentations and discussions, but also because of informal peer negotiations. And those negotiations were motivated by the desire to play. *Thus, a fourth critical feature of the Author's Theater practice was simply that it was fun.* Given the choice of watching other children play or actively participating in that play, many children bargained for a part in others' stories.

Superhero stories were particularly appealing, offering pleasurable roles informed by the larger society's messages. Open for public witnessing and, supposedly, for public participation, superhero stories engendered issues of the limited roles of girls, the heterosexual teasing that disrupted play, the desires of both boys and girls to get on with the business of being a superhero—and the conflicting images of what a superhero's life was like.

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[14]For critical perspectives on gender and currently popular writing pedagogies, see Gilbert (1994), and Kamler (1993).

Thus, Holly, Tina, and their friends became intensely involved in exploring their relationships with each other, just as all children do, in one way or the other. They read each others' faces, clothes, and ways of talking; they write each other's futures in the stories they imagine. This sort of reading and writing happens at the same time, and through the same activities, that teach children to spell, to write on the line, to compose.[15] As educators, we must, I believe, help children discover the ways in which their reading and writing of each other limits their collective possibilities and prevents the play from going on.

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[15]For a rich discussion of the links between cultural identity, societal ideologies, and literacy learning, see Luke et al. (in press).

APPENDIX
SEX AND ETHNICITY OF SECOND GRADE CHILDREN

Sex	Ethnicity
FEMALE	
Holly	African American/European American
Johnetta	African American
LaShanda	African American/Native American
Lettrice	African American
Liliana*	European American
Lynn*	European American
Margaret*	European American
Makeda	African American
Melissa*	European American
Monique	African American
Rhonda	African American
Susan*	European American
Sarah*	European American
Tamara	European American
Tina	African American
MALE	
Aloyse	Ethiopian American (immigrant)
James	Korean American
Jonathan*	European American
Kevin	European American
Lawrence	African American/European American
Michael	African American
Nyem	African American
Patrick	European American
Radha	Indian (Asian) American
Ricky	African American
Sammy	African American
Seth*	European American
Thomas	African American

*Children from homes in which at least one parent had a middle class, white-collar job.

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